Hand over the reins… a case study for student-staff partnership in designing module assessments

CASE STUDY

Hand over the reins: A case study for student-staff partnership in designing module assessments

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ABSTRACT

This case study of a student-staff partnership project to design assessments in a new undergraduate Law module, emphasises the importance of building trust and an equitable partnership before handing over the reins and enabling students to fully control an aspect of curriculum design. The case study focuses upon a model for partnership in module design with students as active partners in co-creation, having full control within clear boundaries. Outcomes include a positive impact for the student partners as it helped them to develop employability attributes from their involvement in the project, as well as giving them an understanding of the other side of the student-teacher relationship. The partnership also had a broader positive impact on the student community, by amplifying their voices and breaking down the power dynamic between staff and students to enable students to engage meaningfully with module design, which has led to further positive partnership working.

KEYWORDS

co-creation, partnership, students as partners, module design, assessment,

This is a practical case study focusing upon the process of carrying out a collaborative student-staff partnership to design assessments within a new module. This paper focuses upon the process of partnership and the reflections and impact on the students and staff participating, as well as for the wider student community.

The idea of students and staff working collaboratively in partnership is gathering momentum and is "arguably one of the most important issues facing higher education in the 21st century" (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014). There is no one single way to achieve partnership (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2016), and the involvement of students seems to broadly fall within two camps (Dianati & Oberhollenzer, 2020), either student-voice (Cook-Sather, 2014), where student views are consulted or students are represented in some way, or student-action (Dunne & Zandstra, 2011), in which students lead by doing something within the partnership. Whilst the idea of consulting students to establish their views on a particular project is far from new (Halsey et al., 2006), the literature suggests that moving from student-voice to student-action with

students becoming co-producers rather than a consultative body is increasingly effective, with the language of students as "change agents" becoming more prevalent (Healey et al., 2016; Dunne & Zandstra, 2011).

This partnership falls firmly into the second camp, with students leading an aspect of curriculum design as student-actors and change agents; the case study is put forward as a model of how this can be achieved.

BACKGROUND AND OUR CONTEXT

The study of law tends to be rather traditional and reliant upon end-of-year examinations. Student feedback and module evaluations over a number of years had highlighted the lack of diversity of both the type and timing of assessments. With an idea to create a new practically focused law module giving students career-ready skills training (Knox & Stone, 2019) closely allied to the early years of legal practice, we felt that this was a golden opportunity to create more innovative assessments.

The brief was to design assessments for this new module which were mapped to previously identified legal employability skills (Bennett & Cooper, 2018), and the starting point was to see how the student voice could be incorporated within this design process. Considering Bovill's (2017) participation matrix, we resolved to move on from merely consulting students (student-voice) to involve students more collaboratively as partners (student-action), engaging in a meaningful way and avoiding the pitfalls of asking students to be involved, only to minimise their involvement (Delpish et al., 2010).

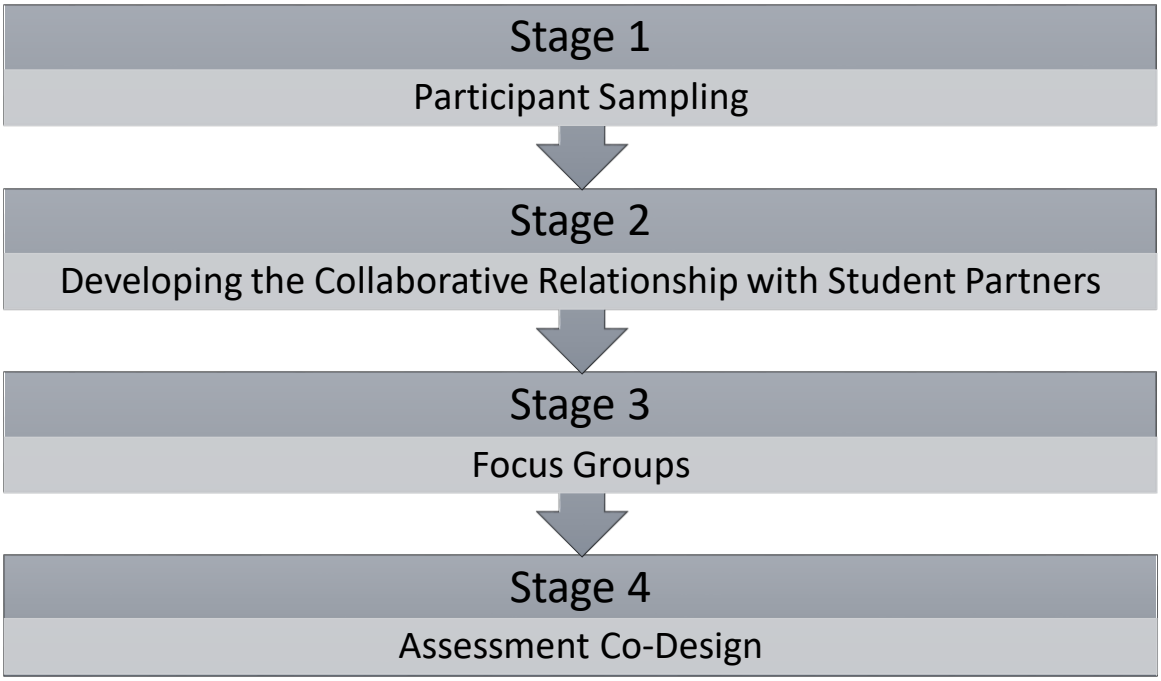
Bovill and Bulley (2011) identified eight levels of participation, described as rungs on a ladder within their "ladder of student participation in curriculum design" model. The ladder builds from the bottom rung, which is without any student interaction, to the top rung, which requires giving complete control to the students. As a meaningful partnership project, this project fits squarely within the fifth rung of the ladder, "student control of prescribed areas," as the students were in control of assessment design within the project. Bovill and Bulley's (2011) assertion that the aim is not necessarily to reach the top of the ladder is worth emphasising, as that outcome may not be better within curriculum design, and in this project there were rational reasons not to climb higher up the ladder (primarily time constraints and the lack of collaborative partnership experience on both sides).

Within the partnership, academic staff retained control of the knowledge and delivery of the module; however, the student-designed assessments informed the vehicles for delivery of the curriculum.

OUR PARTNERSHIP PROCESS

This project involved a four-stage process set out in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. The four-stage partnership process



Stage 1: Participant sampling

Student partners were sought from the second-year law cohort on the assumption that they would be more willing to become involved in module development if they would then have the opportunity to select that module in their next academic year. Marquis et al. (2018) note a number of barriers to partnership; by offering the opportunity to all second-year students, it encouraged as many students as possible to get involved. A staff partner made the request in person, as a guest within a large lecture of 300 students and the request was repeated by email, thereby catching any students who were absent.

Twenty-eight students responded to the invitation (approximately 10% of the cohort)—a selective rather than elective partnership (Bovill, 2017). Cognisant that the time commitment required can be a barrier to participation (Marquis et al., 2018), staff partners offered students options for involvement at different levels (i.e., in focus groups or as core partners) in an effort to widen the pool of participants. All respondents wanted to participate in focus groups, whereas 10 students were interested in joining the more time-consuming core partnership, which would lead on assessment design. The core partners were selected from those 10 by inviting an explanation of why they wanted to be involved with the aim of ensuring a diverse range of students (Mercer-Mapstone & Marie, 2019). Our final partnership included one male student and four female students (including a mature student—defined as over the age of 21 [Hubble & Bolton, 2020]—and an international student). No incentives were offered other than the opportunity to get involved in a partnership and refreshments.

Stage 2: Developing the collaborative relationship with student partners

Conscious of the importance of building a trusting relationship at the outset (Bovill & Felten, 2016; McKerlie et al., 2018), we began with brainstorming, which doubled-up as an ice-breaker session. This was effective as the students were drawn from the second-year cohort and were not known to the staff partners previously, and the new module was a final

year module. The fact that new students had volunteered was notable, as student participants often tend to be those who volunteer frequently (Matthews, 2017).
Noting that the power balance can be problematic in staff-student partnerships (Matthews, 2017; Nahar & Cross, 2020) we wanted to start from an equal footing whilst being conscious that the partners bring differing expertise to the process (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). At the outset, whilst staff led the initial conversations, discussions were aimed at setting the expectation that this was to be co-creation rather than consultation. Student partners acknowledged this, "The (academics) really trusted students and genuinely wanted to reflect students' opinions and desires. I think there was a genuine intention to create a module for the best of students and the mutual trust laid the foundations for a partnership."

As the students gained confidence, they began to take ownership of the project. They decided that rather than struggling to get their peers to respond to surveys, it would be more effective to sample student views about assessment qualitatively using two focus groups with the incentive of lunch to encourage participation.

Stage 3: Focus groups

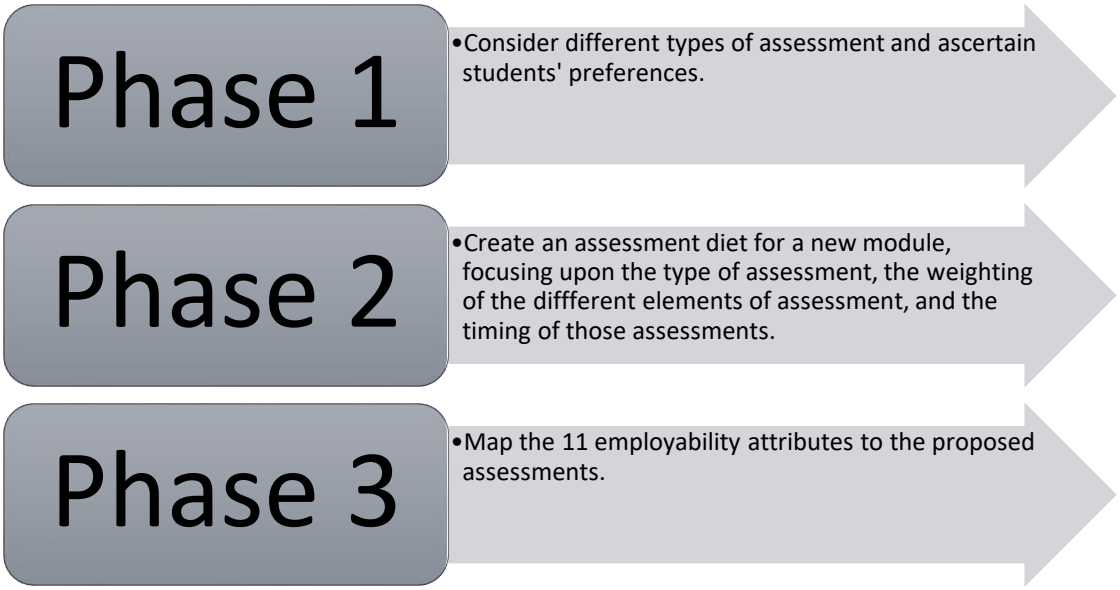
In many ways, the core student partners operated as a focus group throughout, as they discussed the project with peers and brought their own thoughts about assessment and employability to discussions, recording their ideas.

Recruitment for the focus group sessions was straightforward. The student partners requested volunteers in a compulsory lecture of their peers, which was followed by an email request to the entire second year cohort; this is another example of the students taking control. Focus group recruitment was healthy with 10 second-year law students volunteering, but for each focus group (of five students—each comprising four female students and one male student), a student dropped out at the last minute. An advantage of having student partners so closely involved was that they swiftly recruited replacement participants. The focus groups were run on two separate dates to accommodate student volunteer availability, and volunteers were briefed as to the three phases of discussion. The visible role of the student partners and the opportunity to have their voices listened to were clear motivating factors. One student partner commented: "Students really wanted to engage. The focus groups were flooded with students; people wanted to talk. Students are looking to get involved in their degree."

The partnership decided that the student partners would run the focus groups; this was a pivotal decision for the aspirations of power-sharing within the partnership, (Matthews, 2017). We hoped that the student participants would respond better to their peers within the focus groups, thereby avoiding the implicit hierarchical structure of staff having power over students (Matthews, 2017).

Prior to the focus group sessions, the staff partners cascaded knowledge of how to facilitate a focus group to the student partners. We collaboratively designed three phases of tasks for the focus groups to aid discussion (see Figure 2, below).

Figure 2. Three-phase focus group planning



The phases were designed with the first phase acting as an ice-breaker activity to get the focus group participants talking about assessment preferences. The second phase was the critical section and was designed to seek students' views about assessment types, when they would occur, and their relative weighting within the module. The final phase involved a simple mapping exercise to look at each assessment proposed and ascribe to it the relevant employability attributes (Bennett & Cooper, 2018).

The risk of this student-led approach was that the student partners would lack experience in running focus groups or lack confidence in moderating their peers; neither risk was made out in reality. Whilst a little rough and ready at times, the student partners' focus group moderation was good enough and discussion flowed.

To support student partners, it was helpful for the staff partners to do the "hard work" in advance (i.e., logistics, materials, catering), and then literally take a back seat in the room to take notes (and field any questions about the subject knowledge for the course, playing to staff partners' expertise [Cook-Sather et al., 2014]). This enabled the student partners to turn up and facilitate the sessions free from any administrative load, reducing anxiety and increasing their confidence, which reassured the participants. Student partners discussing assessment and employability with their peers worked incredibly well. It is important to acknowledge that the moderator will by necessity shape the data and cannot be truly objective (Kitzinger, 1994). However, one drawback of the student partner–led focus groups was that the student partners had begun to form their own views as to what the module assessment could look like and explicitly or implicitly tried to influence the focus groups and steer them towards those ideas. One of the focus group participants expressed this concern in post-session feedback, "Although it was an open discussion it sometimes felt like the student leaders would ask an open-ended question but already have an answer in mind and would push you to deliver that one answer".

Whilst this was a risk with having the students as facilitators, on balance it was worth that risk in order to reduce the power imbalance which may have inhibited discussion. The outcomes of the focus groups were very diverse, leading to different module assessment proposals (which we termed "module assessment diets") which suggests that even if the

student partners had influenced the discussions, they did not dictate them and the overall benefits of having student facilitators far outweighed the negatives.

Stage 4: Assessment co-design

Involving students in curriculum design provides them with the opportunity to gain greater control of and commitment to the learning process (Bovill et al., 2011). Whilst Garcia et al. (2018) found that students tended to highlight problems, rather than provide solutions, this was not our experience, possibly because our students were co-designers rather than consultees. The students' control of assessment design meant they took responsibility for solving issues, creating a considered proposal for the assessments, which was ultimately adopted. The assessment design process mirrored phases two and three adopted in the focus groups (see Figure 2). As the students considered the different options for assessment design from their focus group data and combined that with their own ideas, the staff partners were able to provide advice as to the advantages and disadvantages of those assessments and how the timing of the assessments would blend with the delivery of the module. For example, at one point the student partners were considering four separate assessment points throughout the year. Staff partners were on hand to explain the logistical difficulties of this, so the students combined assessment elements, reducing to two assessment dates. A focus group suggestion for offering a choice of assessment types was adopted wholeheartedly by student partners, and staff were able to resolve the practical issues involved.

With the introduction of novel assessment types, the students were keen to emphasise that the students on the module would require more support, and this was built into the module design by the staff partners, adopting the student partners' recommendation.

The final stage of design involved the phase three mapping of employability attributes to the assessments; this has made the attributes explicit to students on the module and has been highlighted as a positive feature.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Student-staff partnerships bring a range of benefits (Killen & Chatterton, 2015). Three key themes emerged from our project:

1. Improving student partners' employability,
2. Community building and student voice, and
3. A foundation for future collaborations.

1. Improving student partners' employability

Whilst the aim of this project was to embed employability skills into module assessments, a beneficial by-product was that the student partners themselves have directly gained employability skills. As one student partner explained, "It has given me so much more to talk about in my applications and on my CV, as it demonstrates so many good attributes and skills."

Student partners gained leadership skills by running the focus groups and leading the assessment design process and increased their confidence whilst improving communication skills. These attributes have been highlighted in their dissemination of the project both within our institution and externally; four out of the five partners have presented at national

conferences. One of our student partners commented, "It has boosted my confidence—presenting at the conference after the completion of the process was something that I never thought that I would have the courage to do."

Participation in designing and managing curricula can lead to increased confidence in expressing views in academic settings (Delpish et al., 2010). This is exemplified by the student partner who did not want to get involved with dissemination. She said, "I learnt a lot. . . . I also gained courage to voice out my opinions." The impact on her personally, whilst less vocal and obvious, cannot be underestimated.

2. Community building and the student voice

The personal development of the student partners can extend to the wider cohort (Curran, 2017). One student partner explained, "All of the people that I know have thought that it was a great idea to have student involvement in the designing assessments of the modules." Another student partner emphasised this point, "Engaging in this way meant that it could be tailored to our needs. . . . As students we had a platform to speak on and actually have our voice heard and listened to."

The students involved were able to explore the other side of the teaching and learning matrix (Becker et al., 2018). This empathy also worked to bind academics and students together as part of the law school community. As one of the student partners commented, "Putting us in your shoes helped us to see what academics deal with."

The main impact for these students was the magnification of their voice in the process of module design and this was reflected in the views of another student partner, "One of the doubts I had was the actual impact that my views would have. However, it felt that the input of the students was instrumental and that our voice had a huge impact on the final product."

Meanwhile, focus group participants found the experience to be enjoyable and felt more engaged with the module; this was borne out by the numbers ultimately choosing to study the module. The students acknowledged that this was a way for their opinions to be listened to, one focus group participant explained that, "University can be a very impersonal experience—it is always good to feel that your voice is being heard and that you can make an active impact on uni life and module development."

3. A foundation for future partnerships

This experience has been transformative (Becker et al., 2018). The project has inspired me to examine more closely other areas of my teaching practice to consider how student partnerships could improve the student experience. The project has been recognised by the student union as an outstanding student-staff partnership within our institution and is considered a trailblazing module. The hopes of one of our student partners have been borne out, "Our success might encourage more module convenors to use this approach. Partnership will make the module more engaging." This partnership model has subsequently been adopted by other colleagues designing new modules, aided by large numbers of student volunteers. The wider student body has seen the positive impact that their involvement led to within this project, inspiring them to engage and the School of Law has embraced partnership working in a range of areas of teaching and learning.

REFLECTIONS ON THE PARTNERSHIP

The obvious strengths of this partnership process are that the students are more invested in the module and more engaged within the law school community. A student partner reflected that, "It is definitely a more engaging module as a result of the pedagogical partnership."

The wider impact within the law school is notable, as academic colleagues have seen the benefits of working in partnership and are considering incorporating partnership into their modules, and students are keen to get involved. This is exemplified by the view of a student partner who said that, "Friends have also said that they think that it would be good to have students partaking in developing other modules too to give their ideas as to how they would like some modules to be assessed."

One of the challenges will be how we can widen and diversify the range of students in future curriculum design partnerships. Students need to see themselves in partnership initiatives (Marquis et al., 2018), and student partners are by far the best advocates for this. Dissemination to their peers has been particularly instructive, with students seeing that their involvement has made a real and substantial difference to module design. This has increased the other students' confidence and encouraged more students to volunteer for subsequent partnership opportunities.

LIMITATIONS

The partnership was not without challenges, however. It would have been preferable to have provided the student partners with more formal training in facilitating focus groups; this could not occur due to time constraints but would have helped mitigate the issues where focus group participants felt "steered" by the student partners.

Time constraints on both sides, with student partners having finite time available and the fixed timeline to be followed to get a module into the programme, limited student involvement to the design of the assessment regime. It would have been desirable if the student partnership could have extended further to include the creation of relevant assessment criteria and learning objectives; a longer-term project starting earlier in the academic year might have enabled us to do this.

The final area for improvement would be to find ways to engage with and consult the wider cohort in the design process. The students decided not to run cohort-wide questionnaires, preferring to undertake focus groups to obtain rich, qualitative evidence. Having subsequently undertaken another partnership project, I recognize now that it is perfectly feasible to run cohort questionnaires alongside the focus groups, and in fact sharing the anonymous questionnaire responses with the focus groups helps reflection and inspires discussion, thereby incorporating wider views.

CONCLUSION

Whilst we have a viable product from our work it is the process of partnership working that was by far the most valuable. A trusting and equitable partnership with students controlling a specific area of curriculum design was the key to success.
For educators wishing to establish a collaborative curriculum design project, we would recommend our approach, which has been successfully replicated within the law school. Engaging students in the process of module design has led to a positive impact upon the student body as a whole, with increased feelings of community and the realisation that student voices are critical to success, adding to the weight of evidence in favour of

partnership working and laying the foundations for further and wider partnerships. One of our focus group participants summed this up perfectly when she said, "If the students have a say in how they're going to do best, it's a win-win. For the lecturers, for the law school, for the students."

This project was reviewed and approved by the University of Reading ethics committee in October 2018.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

Amanda Millmore *is an Associate Professor of Law in the School of Law at the University of Reading, UK with particular interests in Criminal and Family law, partnership working, inclusive pedagogy and embedding employability into the curriculum.*

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